

Mother tongue and students' academic performance in English language among secondary school students

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To site this article

Olanipekun, Shola Sunday, Atteh, Deborah, Zaku, James Andokari, Sarki, Philip Ereson. Mother Tongue and Students' Academic Performance in English Language among Secondary School Students, *International Journal of Language, Literature and Culture*. Vol. 1, No. 1, 2014, pp. 1-6.

Abstract

This is a descriptive survey type research work on the relationship between mother tongue and students' academic performance in English language among secondary school students in Offa Local Government Area of Kwara State, Nigeria. Two hundred students who were offering English and Yoruba language were randomly sample for the study. Pro-forma was used to collect data. Pearson Product Moment Correlation Co-efficient and descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data collected. It was discovered that mother tongue had no effect on academic performance in English language since there is no correlation between students' academic performance in mother tongue and English language. On the basis of gender, it was revealed that female students outclass their male counter-parts in English language while in Yoruba the finding was at variance. Recommendations were put to the fore based on the findings.

Keywords

Mother Tongue, Students' Academic Performance, English and Yoruba Language

1. Background to the Study

This paper aimed to find out gender disparity in language studies and majorly, the effect and relation between mother tongue and students' academic performance in English language. Result of the notion that, English language is the only medium of classroom instruction in Nigerian schools which has affected students' academic performances greatly because the language is foreign to the students. Hence, Student who has problem in communication skill may likely not do well academically not only in English language but in other subjects.

The poor level of achievement in many subject areas may be due to poor foundation in English language among

secondary school students which invariably may be connected with the conflict between mother tongue and English. This is because children in this part of the world are first introduced to their mother tongue with which they comprehend ideas. But as they grow, they sooner or later realise that the language of instruction in schools is basically in English. For this reason, learners struggle in between two languages mentally, socially, economically and educationally.

English language is used in school and the mother tongue at home. For some parents, in a bit to reduce the labour of their children over language utility either in

school or at home; have decided to inculcate in the children the habit of speaking English language alone both at home and in school. But if this kind of mentality is embraced by all, the country may stand the risk of accommodating a bonafide future generations without roots and culture.

To this effect, many scholars over the years in Africa have been working very hard over one common language as language of instruction other than English language. Adesanoye(1994) on national language both for Nigeria and Africa assiduously mentioned Swahili, Wasobia and 'Guosa' which according to him had been proposed by some other scholars. Yet, none of the alternative languages to English postulated by these scholars have come to stay. In view of this, the case for English has always being overstated and the possible relationship between mother tongue and students' academic performance in English has become a virile condition for the position of English language proficiency among students.

2. The Role of English Language in Nigeria

English language is a language without which there could not have been an entity called Nigeria (Ogunsiji and Olanrewaju, 2002). Yet, the academic performance of students both at secondary school and post-secondary school is worrisome. This Adesanoye (1994) pin-pointed while he referred to Adeniran (1992) that there is indeed a lot wrong with performance in English even among university students and graduates for that matter. Nevertheless, where the proficiency in English is lacking in any academic setting, it will definitely lower the academic performance of such students.

This stems from the notion that students' academic performance in English is low, but government gives more attention to science oriented subjects forgetting that English is the language with which all these sciences are taught and studied. Yet, English language in Nigeria has afforded the country a great deal of opportunities of having contact with the international world. This is not in a bit to adore English language than any of the indigenous languages in Nigeria but to unfold that English language is a providential colonial linguistic legacy in Nigeria. Olanipekun (2013) while citing Iliyas (2012) averred that its position is such a ubiquitous one that almost every human pursuit beyond the self requires of the use of English in a sense.

Taiwo (1993) argued that English by virtue of the political power of its native speakers has become the world's international language per excellence. To him, it is the world's predominant language of information, dissemination, diplomacy, trade and so on. Ameyaw (1986) who affirmed that apart from the introduction of English to indigenous peoples of British colonies that has led to existence of numerous independent states like Nigeria or Ghana, he also asserted that in the British colonies, English has become:

1. The instrument of colonial power.
2. The medium for commerce and education.
3. The common means of communication
4. A vehicle for benevolent Victorian enlightenment.

It is in line with the above thought located in the argument of Ameyaw that Araromi (2005) opined that English language has become our lingua franca since it is our official language of communication. It is the language of politics, religion, education, science and technology. He further posited that English language has been made a pre-requisite for admission into all tertiary institutions in Nigeria for without a credit pass in English; no candidate would be offered admission in any of the existing university in Nigeria. The knowledge is important both for educational, economical and national development of a country. The importance of English language as a school subject derives mainly from its utilitarian value to the larger Nigerian society.

Ezekoli (2005) also dispelled that English language is very crucial to the Nigeria education system. It is not only the medium of instruction especially at the upper primary, secondary and tertiary level of education but also the language of text-books. It is through the vehicle of English language that student accesses knowledge in other subject areas. The reason, Oluwole (2008) while referring to Salami (2002) had emphasized the importance of the use of English language in improving communication among the various ethnic groups in Nigeria.

In view of the above therefore, the role of English in Nigeria has made the case for English to be overstated in the sense that it is the only recognized official language in the country. Yet, The Nigerian educational system places very much emphasis on the adoption and usage of the English language in teaching at school levels. Even, at the nursery/primary where the National Policy on Education emphasized the use of the mother tongue, the English language seems to have dominated (Adesina *et.al*, 2013). But the question now is whether there is a relationship between mother tongue and students' academic performance in English language.

3. Students' Academic performance in English Language in Nigeria

The importance of English language for enhancing educational attainment through improved communicative skills and ability can never be over emphasized. Students who have so much difficulties with their communication skill may not function effectively in English, not only in English language but in their academic and this is no reason than the fact that English language in Nigeria today is the language of text-books and the language of instruction in schools (Aina *et. al*, 2013).

However, it is pathetic to note that students' academic performance in the so called "language of instruction" in Nigeria has been awfully embarrassing due to the poor

level of achievement especially in public examinations in which English is not an exemption (Kolawole 1998, Kolawole and Dele 2002). This Ivowi, Okebukola and Oladotun (1992) gave credence to when they averred that the problem of under achievement among school children has persisted in many subjects such as English language.

To this effect, according to Iroegbu (2006) much emphasis is placed on the passing of English language at credit or distinction level in addition to other subjects to enable any candidate gain admission into any Nigerian Higher Institution of learning. Yet, this has not savaged the situation.

The academic performance of students both at secondary school and post-secondary school is worrisome. This Adesanoye (1994) noted while he cited Adeniran that there is indeed a lot wrong with the performance in English even among University students and post-graduate students for that matter. Djihed (2013) also confirmed that even among the Arab Master students, students perform poorly in General English which compound their reading comprehension difficulties.

Abubakar (2005) admitted that the matter is serious because of the effect that English has on all the other subjects of the curriculum at the secondary school level as the only language of instruction. Ojo (2008) asserted that poor reading ability in students is a major catalyst towards the general poor performance of students in schools as he relates this controversial debate on falling standard of education to be centered on the English language. Thus, students are poorly equipped with the language skills and the reason Ayodele (1988) & Falayajo (1997) have supported the view that language inefficiency invariably leads to poor academic performance.

Forthwith, Odeh *et.al.* (2012) while referring to World Bank Report 2004 noticed that performance in English among students in Nigeria has not only been very poor over the years but Nigerian students performed below other children in twenty-six other African countries. Fraser (1980:129) adds that students' poor performance in other school subjects is traceable to the inability of students to express themselves meaningfully in English or meet the language demands the subjects make on them.

To this effect, proficiency in the English language is essentially not only for academic success alone but to perform in life as various individuals. However, there is low proficiency in English language and this to a very large extent resulted in under-achievement among Nigeria senior secondary school students and those at the higher institutions. Sofenwa (1992) has attributed this poor performance in English to the wide disparity and confusion between the language of textbooks, the curriculum, the English language class and the Nigerian society outside the class. But, the research work at hand is targeted at unfolding whether there is a correlation between academic performance in English language and mother tongue.

4. The Concept of Mother Tongue Instruction and Academic Performance

Oluwole, (2008) while referring to Awoniyi (1978) averred that Mother tongue could be defined as the language which a group of people considered to inhabitants of an area acquired in the early years and which eventually becomes their natural instrument of thoughts and communication. Mother tongue is the first language that a person learned. In terms of that view, the person is defined as a native speaker of the first language, although one may also be a native speaker of more than one language if all of the languages were learned without formal education, such as through cultural immersion before puberty. Often a child learns the basics of the first language(s) from family (Wikipedia, 2007).

It is then generally accepted that in teaching and learning processes, the mother tongue of the child is of utmost importance. For one thing, it categorizes a large part of the child's environment, that is, it has names for most of the objects, actions, ideas, attributes and so on that are so important to him, as well as to any society. The mother tongue is the child's environment and is the natural basis on which verbal skills can be built, children learn through communicating in a language, which they understood.

It was in recognition of the importance and contributions of mother tongue to education that made the Federal Ministry of Education in Collaboration with other educational statutory agencies include in the National Policy on Education published in 1977, revised in 1981, the use of mother tongue as a medium of educating pupils at the pre-primary and primary level. However, it is sad to note that in Nigeria, policies are only made; they may not be properly implemented.

Olarewaju (1986) has established that students and teachers consented that science should be taught to Nigerian students in Nigerian languages and so this was considered as a veritable solution to students' under performance in science. In their study, remedying student's underachievement in science through the use of mother tongues as a language of instruction, Olarewaju (1988) exposed some junior secondary school (JSS) students to treatment of teaching integrated science in Yoruba language as the experimental group while the other group-control was exposed to the teaching integrated science in English. The results showed that the experimental group performed significantly better than the control group.

At this juncture, it is very contingent to look at whether mother tongue has something to do with students' academic performance in English language and its usage among the Nigerian pupils and students and to consider whether there is a correlation between students' performance in English and Yoruba language. It is important to draw attention to gender disparity in language studies in connectivity with the main thrust of this research paper, on the basis of what

will be found out, recommendations could be proffered.

5. Definition of Major Term

Mock examination is a preparatory or terminal exam meant for all intended final year students both at Junior Secondary School and at Senior Secondary School. It is organized by the government. The questions are set and moderated by experts in each subject.

6. Research Methodology

The study adopted descriptive survey method where two hundred students' scores in English and Yoruba language, respectively were collected and analyzed for the purpose of this research. These were the graduating secondary school students of 2012/2013 academic session in Offa Local Government Area of Kwara State who combined English with Yoruba Language.

All final year students of this academic session formed the population of the study while the sample population for the study was those who combined English with Yoruba language.

The instruments for this study were scores of students in English and Yoruba language. The instrument needs no validation because the results collected were mocks examination organized by the State Government for all final year students and the results have been moderated by experts in those subjects before being released.

The following null hypotheses and research questions will guide the study:

H01 : there is no significant correlation between students' academic performance in English and Yoruba language.

Q1: is there any significant different in the performance of male and female students in English language?

Q2 : is there any significant different in the performance of male and female students in Yoruba language?

Statistically instruments found suitable for this research work are t-test, Pearson product moment correlation coefficient and descriptive statistics because they are used to determine the degree of two variables (Okoro, 2002) and this could also be supported by (Owie, 1996) that correlation co-efficient is used to compute the strength of association between two variables. Descriptive statistic summarizes a relatively large array of data into meaningful forms such that they could be more easily interpreted (Nkemakolam, 2002).

6. Findings

Table 1. Correlation table of Students' performance in English and Yoruba language.

	N	Correlation	Sig.
English and Yoruba	200	.174	.084

Table 2. Descriptive Statistic of Students' Mean Scores in English language based on Gender.

	N	Mean	Std.Dev.
Males	53	52.5094	11.19688
Females	46	55.8261	11.98759
Valid N(listwise)	46		

Table 3. Descriptive Statistic of Students' Mean Scores in Yoruba language based on Gender.

	N	Mean	Std.Dev.
Males	50	62.1800	12.73384
Females	48	60.9375	16.00586
Valid N(listwise)	48		

Inference that could be drawn from Table 1 above is that there is no correlation between students' academic performance in English language and Yoruba language. Thus mother tongue has no effect on students' academic performance in English language. On the basis of gender, the results in table 2 and 3 shows that gender disparity in academic performance of students based on language studies is not gender specific because in Table 2 females students outclass male students in English language but in Table 3 males outperformed their female counter-parts in Yoruba language.

7. Discussion of Findings

As seen from the findings of this research, there is no correlation between students' academic performance in English and Yoruba language and more importantly, students' academic performance in Yoruba language has no effect on students' academic performance in English language among secondary school students. This therefore posited that there is no tendency for mother tongue interference to hinder students' performance in English language.

However, the above finding is at variance with the findings of Aladejana and Odejobi (1999) when they revealed that a child will learn faster and better if he is taught in his mother tongue at the early stage of his education. It was identified that the mother tongue instruction will help the children to acquire facts and information easily and quickly interpret information obtained properly and correctly acquire practical and manipulative skills easily and develop desirable attitudes towards people.

On the basis of gender in language studies, Karthigeyan *et al* (2012). in their study of academic performance of students in English language from gender lens in India made it known that the performance of the girls is higher than the boys which agreed with research work of this paper in Table 3 where a significant difference exists between boys and girls with the girls performing better. However, Olanipekun *et al* (2013) in their finding identified the males to be the best in language studies and this corroborated with the research in Table 3 where the

males outperformed their female counter-parts in Yoruba Language (mother tongue).

8. Conclusions

It could therefore be concluded that mother tongue has no effect on students' academic performance in English language based on this finding and that there is no correlation between students' academic performance in English and Yoruba language. Thus, English of many students could not have been plagued from mother tongue interference which some scholars have identified to be affecting academic performance in English language which has also extended to other school subjects.

It was also found out that female students were better off in their performance in English language than the males but this was not obtainable in Yoruba language because males outclass their females in Yoruba. However, one cannot generalize with the findings of this research work until further studies are carry-out.

Recommendations

1. Teachers of English Language are reminded that teaching of English Language should not be geared towards passing examination in English per se; rather the emphasis should be on competence of students in writing, reading and speaking as well. This will help in no small measure in making them understand not only English but all other subjects that are taught in English Language.
2. Teachers should bear in mind that most students need to be adequately encouraged to speak English Language at school since they have no opportunity of practicing at home.

Acknowledgements

I really appreciate every author whose works I have cited in the course of this research work and most importantly secondary school language teachers in the State that made available for me, their mock examination without which this research work would not have been possible.

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